

FRONTLINE

New Zealand's 23-day Parliament siege

QAnon and how social media disinformation
manufactured an 'alternate reality'

Abstract: Fires burned across Aotearoa New Zealand's Parliament grounds and violent clashes broke out between protesters and police on the day the law enforcement officers moved to quell a 23-day anti-vaccination mandate siege of the House in February-March 2022 in scenes rarely witnessed in this country (Fires and clashes, 2022). The riot climaxed a mounting campaign of disinformation and hate speech on social media fuelled by conspiracy theories circulated by New Zealand activist media such as *Counterspin*, which emulated their counterparts in Australia and the United States. Vitriolic death threats against political leaders and attacks on journalists and the media on an unprecedented scale were a feature of the protests. Anti-government messages were imported alongside white supremacist ideologies. Researchers have described the events as a 'tectonic shift' that will have a significant and lasting impact on Aotearoa New Zealand's democratic institutions. This commentary introduces three perspectives about the protests and disinformation ecology framed in the journal's reflexive series *Frontline*.

Keywords: democracy, disinformation, conspiracy theories, *Counterspin*, Donald Trump, *Frontline*, investigative journalism, journalism, New Zealand, QAnon, social media

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Our country will not be defined by the dismantling of an occupation. In fact when we look back on this period in our history, I hope we remember one thing. Thousands more lives were saved in the past two years by your actions as New Zealanders than were on that front lawn of Parliament today. The sacrifices we were all willing to make to look after one another, that is what will define us, no protest, no fire, no placards will ever change that.

—Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern on violence outside Parliament (2022)

IN 2012, *Pacific Journalism Review* introduced an innovative section called *Frontline* in an effort to encourage investigative journalism blended with a distinctive reflexive approach to practitioner research and analysis (Bacon, 2012; Nash, 2014, 2020; Robie, 2015; Robie & Marbrook, 2020). In the first edition of this series, the editorial declared that the journal ‘showcases what the editors hope will be a regular feature’ through ‘journalistic practice juxtaposing with critical reflexion by the journalists involved’ (Bacon & Morton, 2012).

Professor Wendy Bacon, one of the pioneers of the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism (ACIJ) which set a standard for university media investigations for 25 years, steered this initiative. She cited the views of Robert Rosenthal, then executive director of the Centre for Investigative Reporting in Berkeley, California. In his view, the world had seen one of the greatest transformations in information and technology in human history, and he added that ‘we’re in the middle of it; we’re in the Petri dish now’ (p. 7). Bacon and colleague Tom Morton wrote in the editorial:

Universities are part of the new culture evolving in the Petri dish. In a time of such intense change and experimentation, journalists and the public should be able to expect that universities will play a role in testing new models and putting new ideas into practice. (Bacon & Moreton, 2012)

In that introductory edition, two *Frontline* articles were published: Karen Abplanalp’s ‘Blood Money’ case study detailed the author’s investigation into the New Zealand Superannuation Fund’s investment in the controversial Freeport copper and gold mine in West Papua, at the time owned by an American corporation (Abplanalp, 2012); while the other, Nicole Gooch’s ‘Sulfate Sunrise’, examined the Vale nickel mine at Goro, Kanaky New Caledonia (Gooch, 2012).

Abplanalp described the journalistic processes involved; and framed them within the context of peace journalism. Gooch reflected on the differing understandings that her indigenous and non-indigenous sources had of environmental issues and the need to locate the conflict around the mine in the broader political, economic and social context of decolonisation.

Many other *Frontline* articles have followed in the years since with the topics ranging from ‘Cloud Forest’, an investigation into court battles and competing environmental narratives in Solomon Islands (Davies, 2015); interrogating power and disrupting the discourse about Onslow and the gas hubs in the Pilbara region of Western Australia (Davies & Barndon, 2016); a Fiji and Pacific climate crisis journalism case study (Robie & Chand, 2017); reversing silences in West Papuan documentary (Lopez, 2020); a tribute to the ‘bearing witness’ and empowerment stance of journalist Jill Emberson (Altman & Bacon, 2020); and



Figure 1: New Zealand police dismantling the anti-vaccination and conspiracy theorist protester tent occupation of the Parliament grounds after a 23-day siege on 2 March 2022.

the making of the Bougainville conflict film *Ophir*—effectively banned from Australian mainstream media (Bacon & Gooch, 2021).

In this edition, *PJR* has approached *Frontline* with a different tack: Instead of practitioners reflecting on a creative or investigative work, we have gathered five contributors examining the ‘tsunami’ of disinformation that accompanied the infamous 23-day siege of Wellington’s Parliament early in 2022 (Fires and clashes, 2022; RNZ, 2022). The journal commissioned articles by a Māori Television videographer (Rituraj Sapkota), who covered the Parliamentary occupation throughout February-March 2022; independent videographer and alt-right researcher Byron Clark, who provides a day-by-day analysis; and core research by the independent Disinformation Project team, Kate Hannah, Sanjana Hattotuwa, and Kayli Taylor.

The Disinformation Project research into the unprecedented protester occupation of Parliament grounds in February-March 2022 has examined how social media inflamed tensions and the role played by a dozen local Facebook accounts spreading disinformation that were at its heart (Hannah, Hattotuwa & Taylor, 2022). The team studied data from tens of millions of online posts, tweets and comments, alongside hundreds of hours of live-streamed footage from the protest.

In an article in *The Conversation*, Massey University sociologist and distinguished professor Paul Spoonley noted the slow realisation by commentators and the news media that the siege of Parliament was not ‘simply an anti-vaccine mandate “protest” but something with more sinister elements’ (Spoonley, 2022;

Kuo & Marwick, 2022). He also noted the toxicity of some of the politics on display, as well as the ‘presence of extreme fringe activists and groups’. He continued:

These politics have been developing for some time, heavily influenced by the rise of a particular form of conspiratorial populism out of Donald Trump’s America, and by the networking and misinformation possibilities of social media. Internationally, researchers noted a decisive shift in 2015-16 and the subsequent exponential growth of extremist and vitriolic content online. This intensified with the arrival of conspiracy movement QAnon in 2017 and the appearance of a number of alt-tech platforms that were designed to spread mis- and disinformation, conspiracy theories (old and new), and ultranationalism and racist views. (Spoonley, 2022)

RNZ SCREENSHOT



Figure 2: Trump supporter flags at the New Zealand Parliamentary grounds protest in February 2022.

About 18 months earlier, journalist David Farrier had signalled a warning in an article in *The Spinoff* about how popular blues musician Billy Te Kahika (BTK) had plunged down a rabbit hole to end up as New Zealand’s ‘premier peddler of conspiracy nonsense’. As the star attraction at an Aotea Square rally in Auckland, BTK unleashed a rapidly growing movement (Farrier, 2020). What Farrier found particularly shocking was not just the conspiratorial beliefs that a growing number of New Zealanders held, but the ‘speed with which these outrageous beliefs are being embraced’ (LaFrance, 2020; Pettipiece, 2021). As Spoonley explained:

I’m sure you can all think of people on your Facebook feed who seemed perfectly rational a month ago, but are now speaking about nothing else except kids trapped in underground tunnels, adrenochrome, and a shadowy cabal of global elites. On Saturday I accidentally happened upon hundreds

of these people, gathered in the centre of Auckland to protest the government's response to COVID-19. There was talk of a new world order, Bill Gates, 5G and the fact that COVID was a manufactured crisis. (Farrier, 2020)

According to the independent Disinformation Project, the deluge of traffic on misinformation pages was at one point higher than that of pages operated by New Zealand mainstream media outlets combined—on one single day, 2 March 2022, they received 350,000 interactions compared with 247,000 for all of the mainstream media sites combined (The Disinformation Project, 2022). The project has been observing disinformation since the beginning of the pandemic, gathering qualitative and quantitative data from a variety of sites. Following the end of the occupation, the followers of anti-vaxxer disinformation were swept along on a Russian 'firehose of falsehood' based on spreading conspiracy theories about bioweapons facilities and paedophile cabals linked to a pretext for invading Ukraine ((Daalder, 2022; see Who's Who?, p. 114-116).

On the project's webpage profile (The Disinformation Project, 2022), the researchers say they have 'used mixed methods approaches to analyse and review the speed and spread of information disorders—and their impact on the lives of New Zealanders'. They argue that Aotearoa New Zealand is 'experiencing an infodemic with the COVID-19 pandemic' furthering the spread of misinformation and disinformation. This has been impacting on social cohesion and—over the longer term—the country's 'democratic fabric and electoral integrity'. Argues project director Kate Hannah:

The Parliament Protest was a turning point in the way Aotearoa New Zealand perceives itself, and the role of misinformation and disinformation in that shift cannot be underestimated. From violative vocabulary to pace of content production, we are now studying information disorders at a scale and scope beyond what we studied at the start of 2022. (The Disinformation Project, 2022)

A colleague, Dr Sanjana Hattotuwa, a research fellow at the project, adds that 'data signatures associated with the protest on social media, pegged to misinformation and disinformation, [have] had no historical precedent. It is a tectonic shift in Aotearoa New Zealand's media landscapes, and information ecologies.' (The Disinformation Project, 2022).

'For those mainstream social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter, it is gathered using CrowdTangle, which is a Facebook-built tool for studying Facebook pages and groups,' Hannah explained in a RNZ interview. 'And then we also have a rich text approach. So, we analyse the content of some of those open posts, and also the content of things like flyers, billboards, placards, and signs, WhatsApp messages and emails that sometimes members

of the public send us as examples of misinformation that they have received or people they love have received.’

The project researchers had started to see a skew towards disinformation since August 2021. In an interview with RNZ’s *Nine To Noon* programme (RNZ, 2022), Hannah said that

[t]he whole country was incredibly interested in what was taking place at Parliament. And so many people were watching livestreams, and obviously from mainstream media platforms like Radio New Zealand, and the television stations to understand what was taking place.

But what is so interesting and quite remarkable and something we need to think about going forward is this, how so many people were getting their information from places that were completely grounded in a different interpretation and a different reality of what was going on. (RNZ, 2022)

For the first extended period of time, online communities manifested as offline communities during the Parliament protests, argued Hannah.

The experience of the people who were on the ground at Parliament, and those that they were communicating with who either wanted to be there or maybe had been there but had returned home because there was a lot of movement over that period of 23 days, was markedly different from the experience of those of us who were observing what was going on both online and offline.

And so we get the splintered reality where people genuinely felt connected, supported. They were being fed, they were being looked after, they were being told that their own sense of loss or personal grievance had a political or social importance that connected into a bigger picture.

Meanwhile, the rest of us were observing from the outside, seeing violence, death threats, harassment of schoolchildren, people who lived in apartments nearby feeling very unsafe, sort of dirt and destruction, so there were very different experiences offline and online over quite an extended period of time. (RNZ, 2022)

Misinformation has been creeping in to New Zealand for a couple of years, argued Hannah. Her team’s research has indicated that the country was experiencing increasing amounts of ‘US-style content’ filtering into the country’s information ecosystem since the American elections of 2020 (Binder, 2018, Clark, 2022; Kamola, 2021, Wong, 2020). There was a further key spike around the period of the 6 January 2021 insurrection at the US Capitol, when Trump supporters stormed Congress in a failed bid to overturn President Joe Biden’s election, and then again throughout the rest of that year. In the Congressional inquiry in June 2022, Trump was accused of orchestrating the Capitol riot in an ‘attempted coup’. Liz Cheney, the Republican vice-chair of the committee, said

Trump had ‘lit the flame of the attack’ (January 6 hearing, 2022; Trump accused of attempted coup, 2022). As Hannah explained:

Because the US experienced lockdowns, mask mandates and vaccination ahead of New Zealand, there were pre-packaged sets of disinformation about those issues that linked those issues to a conspiracy around the role of the state. And those pre-packaged conspiracies were transferred into the New Zealand environment almost intact.

By the time New Zealand went into level 4 lockdown in August 2021, that material had become embedded within a small community that grew rapidly.

Australian journalist Van Badham, who had experienced the viciousness of internet trolls first hand went undercover to report on the geopolitical scale of the disinformation campaigns. Her 2021 book *QAnon and On* was a damning exposé of this century’s most dangerous and far-fetched internet cults and their ‘alternate reality’ from the inside. In her final chapter she dissected the Capitol fiasco by ‘definitely brownshirts—just ones that hadn’t realised that their shirts were brown’ (p. 405)—and speculated on the possible identity of Q.

Whoever is behind the nonsensical Q posts, it’s the audience of willing conspiracists who are the real authors of Q, as much as it is any congregation whose will to believe is what moulds and shapes a god. Yes, if Q didn’t exist, it would be necessary to invent Q, if only because taking lease of people’s ‘eyes and ears and nerves’ to manipulate them—as Marshall McLuhan predicted of new media—is always so much easier when those body parts are volunteered. If Q’s author is its audience, the most important search is for who it is that most stands to profit from their fealty. (Van Badham, 2021, p. 400)

On her list of Q possibilities are *Breitbart* publisher and alt-right strategist Steve Bannon, or ‘one of his talented minions’ (Badham, p. 403; Richter, 2017), whose publications are reportedly linked to the *Counterspin* of New Zealand Parliament notoriety, or even former President Trump himself.

In New Zealand, as Prime Minister Ardern observed in her media conference at Parliament on 2 March 2022 after police had seized back control of the Parliamentary grounds in Wellington and cleared the adjacent inner city streets: ‘One day it will be our job to try and understand how a group of people could succumb to such wild and dangerous mis- and disinformation’. (Ardern, 2022)

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